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AFTER THE GODS

FOR CENTURIES, classical mythology functioned as an inter-medium that connected the different arts and anchored them in society.¹ It forged a link between visual art and literature, with the interpretations of humanist scholars often supplying subjects for poets, painters and sculptors alike. This tradition was founded above all on the supreme literary and artistic value attached to ancient culture; while it was clear that the literal subjects were heathen gods and un-Christian heroes, their exploits were allegorized so that a mythological rape scene could suggest an array of profound meanings and become a suitable subject for literature and art.

By the eighteenth century, however, mythology's traditional cultural position came under pressure as debate raged on the origin and meaning of myths. De-allegorizing the Greek gods, eighteenth-century *philosophes* found them no less barbaric than the myths of contemporary 'savages': both were instances of a 'primitive mentality' in which man expresses himself not through abstract reasoning, but through images. A fundamental difference between such modes of thought and modern, rational culture was proclaimed, laying the basis for contemporary conceptions of myth. As more distant and 'primitive' civilizations became better known, Christian apologists and comparative mythologists battled over such questions as whether a universal 'primitive monotheism'—later distorted by polytheist mythologies (except in Judaism)—had been common to all civilizations; and whether all myths were corruptions of the Bible. Biblical stories—the Flood, for instance—were increasingly recognized as local iterations of more widely diffused myths, and the origins of Christianity as lying in mythology rather than in revelation.

The new accounts of myth and religion robbed Renaissance interpretations of both Christian and Graeco-Roman subjects of their pretended

timelessness and universality, and precipitated an 'iconographic crisis'.² This disintegration of the Renaissance tradition went hand in hand with the rise of Idealist and Romantic aesthetics, or what Jacques Rancière has termed the 'aesthetic regime', which approaches works of art as *choses de pensée*, objects of thought. In Schelling's words, art is *werkstätige Wissenschaft*, practical science, rather than a representation of a mythological or historical subject that follows certain established laws. But works of art were not to be assimilated to discursive thought; they bear witness to a different sort of apprehension, 'a form of thought which is immanent in its other and inhabited by its other'.³ Art became a form of thought that is intimately tied to non-thought, to a mimetic residue resistant to reason. Myth was one name for this dark side of art—its non-identical side, heteronomous and not containable within the neatly defined limits of art. Yet 'myth', in naming this side, also identifies it and integrates it into discourse. But this process is never complete, and Romantic and modern art often worked against it, exacerbating rather than reducing the mystery. The conventional use of old mythologies risked making them little more than a bureaucratically managed set of subjects with certain allotted meanings. Increasingly, the use of non-Western, 'primitive' myths was to prove alluring, as was the tempting, if elusive prospect of creating new Romantic mythologies.

Schelling succinctly stated what was, in the years around 1800, a shared opinion among Romantics and Idealist thinkers: 'Mythology is the necessary precondition and the primary subject of all art.'⁴ Religious in origin, mythology basically existed in order to become poetic, to become artistic. The desire to reintegrate art into an organic community led to different versions of the visionary concept of a 'new mythology', but none of these could offer thinkers or artists a ready-made set of mythological

¹ I would like to thank Stewart Martin for his comments on an earlier draft of this article; any errors or inconsistencies are of course my own.

² The classic study of 18th century mythology is Frank Manuel, *The Eighteenth Century Confronts the Gods*, Cambridge, MA 1959. The term 'iconographical crisis' was coined by Werner Busch, *Das sentimentalische Bild: Die Krise der Kunst im 18. Jahrhundert und die Geburt der Moderne*, Munich 1993.

³ Jacques Rancière, *L'Inconscient esthétique*, Paris 2001, pp. 12, 50. Schelling's phrase is from his lecture 'Über das Verhältnis der bildenden Künste zu der Natur' (1807), in K. F. A. Schelling, ed., *Sämmtliche Werke*, vol. 7, Stuttgart and Augsburg 1859, p. 299.

⁴ F. W. J. Schelling, *Philosophie der Kunst* (1802–03), in *Sämmtliche Werke* (ed. K. F. A. Schelling), vol 5, Stuttgart and Augsburg 1859, p. 405.

motifs with which they could work. By contrast, Goethe and Johann Heinrich Meyer tried to supply visual artists with a new approach to classical mythology, which would as it were preserve the iconographical tradition in a different guise. Both tendencies wanted to establish an art that would be valid in a time when the old iconography and formal conventions had been eroded through the decoding and deterritorialization of the previous economic and social order; both tried to find a way of negotiating modern art's broken ties with its traditional social, cultural and political moorings. Both did so by according important but very different roles to mythology. Goethe and Meyer effectively tried to 'tame' heteronomous myth by making strict rules for which subjects were suitable—a move not dissimilar to the conventionalization of mythology in the Renaissance tradition, though Goethe and Meyer now tried to deduce criteria for proper use from visual art's specific characteristics. As a result, myth was made a servant of art's inherent logic, its difference reduced. By contrast, Schelling and others who demanded a new mythology tried to use myth to transcend art's limitations and to change modern culture and society as a whole.

'Mythology must become philosophical'

In various texts from the 1760s to the 1790s, Herder meditated on the dubious use value of ancient mythologies—the products of vastly different societies—to modern (German) writers, and asked under what circumstances old myths might be renewed or a new mythology created.⁵ His hesitant tone is in marked contrast to that of the so-called 'Ältestes Systemprogramm des deutschen Idealismus', a brief and incomplete but ambitious—not to say brash—programme for a post-Kantian Idealist philosophy, and for a rational and harmonious society. It was most likely written in 1797, though published only in 1917 by Franz Rosenzweig. Although it is in Hegel's handwriting, Rosenzweig asserted that the nature of the text strongly suggests Hegel's onetime co-student Schelling as the actual author, an idea that has been contested in recent decades.⁶ In what seems almost like a deliberately ironic echo of the 'authorless', collective origin of myth, the origin of the

⁵ Manfred Frank, *Der kommende Gott. Vorlesungen über die neue Mythologie*, Frankfurt am Main 1982, pp. 125–52.

⁶ See the introduction in Christoph Jamme and Helmuth Schneider, eds, *Mythologie der Vernunft. Hegels 'ältestes Systemprogramm' des deutschen Idealismus*, Frankfurt am Main 1984, pp. 21–76.

new concept of mythology itself cannot be ascribed to a single author with complete certainty.

According to the *Systemprogramm*, the highest idea on which art and society must be founded is the—Platonic—ideal of beauty, which can unite the fragmented post-Kantian world: beauty is truth, it is morally good. The poetry of the future should be ‘polytheistic’, swarming with colourful deities: ‘Thus poetry gains a higher dignity, and it ends up becoming what it was in the beginning: teacher of mankind.’ The author is thus led to the notion of a new mythology, which he claims has never before occurred to anyone (all the more ironic, then, that we do not really know who is speaking). This new mythology must be in the service of reason. By fusing philosophy with art, ideas with the world of the senses, it will not only heal the Kantian rift between freedom and nature, between the ideal and the real; it will also reconcile the free-floating modern intelligentsia with ‘the people’ and so create universal harmony.

Until we aestheticize, that is, mythologize ideas they will not interest the people, and conversely: until mythology has become reasonable, it will embarrass the philosopher. Therefore, the enlightened and the unenlightened must finally shake hands, mythology must become philosophical, the people reasonable, and philosophy must become mythological in order to make the philosophers sensuous. Then eternal unity shall prevail among us.⁷

The new mythology will be a new religion, but one conceived in aesthetic, poetic terms. In its bid to erase the dividing lines between religion, philosophy and art, it strives to recreate a prelapsarian state in which such distinctions are mere differences in emphasis.

In this sense, the *topos* of the new mythology is a version of the Romantic dream of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*—the total work of art that not only binds the individual arts into a coherent whole (as the medieval cathedral was supposed to have done) but also unites art once more with ‘the people’, conceived as an organic entity. While the term *Gesamtkunstwerk* would be coined by Wagner in the mid-nineteenth century, his view of the *Musikdrama* as total work of art is an elaborate variation on a tendency already discernible in the less crystallized, shape-shifting aesthetic debates of the years around 1800. Philipp Otto Runge dreamt of an architectural setting for his *Zeiten* paintings that would be ‘an abstract painterly,

⁷ ‘Das älteste Systemprogramm des deutschen Idealismus’ (1797) in F. W. J. Schelling, *Texte zur Philosophie der Kunst*, Stuttgart 1982, p. 98.

fantastic musical poem with choruses, a composition for all three arts together'; Friedrich Schlegel's conception of Romantic poetry as *progressive Universalpoesie* can also be seen in this context, as Romantic poetry was to unify all genres of poetry, indeed all genres of literature and criticism, and thus transcend its traditional limits.⁸ This could be described as the progressive *Gesamtkunstwerk* of early German Romanticism: its universality was to be one of change, of open-ended development, not the hierarchical and fundamentally static dream of totality that already manifests itself in Runge's fantasy. Like Schlegel's early fragments, the idealist *Systemprogramm* universalizes poetry and equates it with art as such; yet the *Systemprogramm* also, via its mythological conception of poetry (or poetical conception of mythology), already seeks to impose 'eternal unity'.

With the *Systemprogramm* remaining unpublished for more than a century, the project for the new mythology was first made public in 1800 by Schelling and Friedrich Schlegel. At that time, when he was close to Schlegel's Romantic circle, Schelling was guided by the conviction that art was the highest sphere of human activity—higher than philosophy, or at least equal to it. Of all the arts, poetry was of paramount importance, since it would serve as the location for the construction of the new mythology, which would have repercussions for all the others. Schelling longed for a modern Homer, and such a poet needs gods: 'What ideas are for philosophy gods are for art, and vice versa.'⁹ In art, the real embodies the ideal, and these embodied ideas are gods—hence Schelling's notion that mythology is 'the necessary precondition and the primary subject of all art.' In later works such as the *Philosophie der Offenbarung*, Schelling would develop a religious philosophy of myth, but his early thought on the subject focuses on its artistic, poetic, imaginative aspects. His new mythology is nothing less than the proposed poeticization or 'romanticization' of the world, to put it in Novalis's terms. The whole world is to become a total work of art, with everything flowing back into the 'ocean of poetry', in which intellectuals can swim just as happily as simple people, thus re-enchanting the world and creating a true collective mythology. Myth, which penetrates art from a realm beyond the borders

⁸ Philipp Otto Runge quoted in Günther Metken, 'Die Wiedergeburt des Musikdramas aus dem Geiste der Kunstgeschichte. Richard Wagner und die Künste', in Harald Szeemann, ed., *Der Hang zum Gesamtkunstwerk*, Berlin 1983, p. 76; Friedrich Schlegel, 'Athenäums'-Fragments (1798), in *Kritische und theoretische Schriften*, Stuttgart 1978, pp. 90–1.

⁹ Schelling, *Philosophie der Kunst*, p. 391.

of its autonomy, is thus used to explode art's autonomous condition, to let it transcend its limitations and become universal.

New world born from chaos

According to the Schelling of 1800–04, Christianity possessed no real mythology comparable to that of the ancients. In Greek mythology, gods were symbolic embodiments of ideas, and hence of the absolute; Christ, the 'last God', is not a symbolic figure in this sense, as he is a concrete, specific human individual who also happens to be divine. Great Christian poets such as Dante, Shakespeare, Cervantes and Goethe were thus forced to create their own equivalents of the Greek pantheon.¹⁰ Romantic enthusiasm for a poetic *Gesamtkunstwerk* uniting art and the people was dimmed somewhat by the realization that a truly collective mythology could not be created at will. It lay beyond the reach of modern poets or painters, who could not transcend art's autonomy *from their autonomous position*; aesthetic mythology could not become truly mythological, that is universal, as long as it was aesthetic.

In the 'System des transzendentalen Idealismus' (1800) Schelling had already raised doubts as to whether such a mythology could be created: 'But how a new mythology, which cannot be the invention of a single poet but only of a new race [*Geschlecht*] which as it were acts as One Poet, can come about, this is a problem which can only be solved by the future vicissitudes of the world and the further course of history.'¹¹ He made a similar point in the *Philosophie der Kunst*—now also referring to the new speculative physics and Romantic-Idealist *Naturphilosophie* as possible sources. But Schelling held out little hope for the rapid creation of unifying myths which, in the modern Christian worldview, had to be historically situated, as miracles. From the material offered by history, poets must create their own mythologies, as Dante or Shakespeare had done:

So until history gives us once more a general mythology, the individual will have to create its own mythological circle; and as the general element of modernity is originality, the law will apply that the more original something is, the more universal it will be (although one has to distinguish originality and particularity).¹²

¹⁰ Schelling, *Philosophie der Kunst*, pp. 431–3, 444–9.

¹¹ Schelling, 'System des transzendentalen Idealismus' (1800), in Schelling, ed., *Sämmtliche Werke*, vol 3, p. 629.

¹² Schelling, *Philosophie der Kunst*, p. 447.

These remarks are unthinkable without the work of the Schlegel brothers. Friedrich Schlegel in particular—although he would later become a reactionary Catholic who tried to turn medieval culture into a rigid aesthetic model—initially embraced modern originality just as wholeheartedly as Schelling. Indeed, in the ‘Gespräch über die Poesie’ (1800), he developed the notion of a new mythology with even greater Romantic fervour than the latter. The text is a dialogue in which one character, Ludoviko, gives an ‘Address on Mythology’. ‘I claim that our poetry is lacking a centre such as the mythology of the ancients. Everything substantial in which modern poetry falls behind the literature of antiquity can be summarized as follows: we have no mythology.’ Ludoviko grandly declares Idealism and speculative physics to be the roads to the new mythology—a reminder of Schlegel’s association with Schelling in those days. But here, the emphasis is different. Schlegel presents mythology as a joyful chaos of gods, forever in transformative flux, *Anbilden und Umbilden*; Schlegel, or Ludoviko, claims that Romantic poetry with its contradictions and ironies is already an ‘indirect mythology’.¹³ The role of originality and individuality is affirmed; there are many paths to the new mythology. Yet however brilliantly turbulent this is imagined to be, it can still be described as a *Gesamtkunstwerk* in that it will re-enchant the world and thus unite people in an organic *Gemeinschaft*.

What matters here is not so much authors ‘influencing’ each other as a constellation of texts that propose, with different inflections, the project of a new mythology, of a mythological *Gesamtkunstwerk*, of a religious-philosophical-artistic unity healing the rifts that run through contemporary society and the modern subject. Schelling emphasized the unitary character that a truly new mythology would have to possess, and grew increasingly sceptical of whether it could possibly be realized. He abandoned the project completely in his later writings, where he interpreted myth religiously rather than poetically, and presented ancient mythology as a theogonic process culminating in Christianity. Friedrich Schlegel sketches a potentially non-authoritarian *Gesamtkunstwerk*, but sees the apparent chaos of true mythology as the highest form of order, in which all literary works link together in an organic fashion to form a single body. In a sense, Schlegel here prepared the ground for his later attempt to impose ‘organic’ wholeness on society and culture along

¹³ Friedrich Schlegel, ‘Gespräch über die Poesie’ (1800), in *Kritische und theoretische Schriften*, Stuttgart 1978, p. 190–5.

Catholic lines. For if order does not automatically, spontaneously spring from disorder, it has to be imposed forcibly.

Goethe's symbolic gods

A generation earlier, Johann Joachim Winckelmann's writings on art history had tended to relegate the gods to the sphere of formal beauty. While radical comparative mythologists compared Greeks to South Sea islanders—both seen as superstitious barbarians—Winckelmann idealized classical Greece as a time and place when political and environmental conditions combined to bring forth an ideal beauty, both in the flesh and in art. Winckelmann considered Homer to be the basis of Greek artistic production. Homer's writing was highly visual and plastic, as compared to the work of a modern 'northern' poet such as Milton. In part because of Homer's influence, and as distinct from the disjunction of form and meaning in much art before and since, Greek visual art dealt with lofty ideals in perfectly suitable, sensuous forms. Homeric myth helped Greek art to acquire its highly specific character. *Contra* those who saw Greek myths as mere derivations from older Egyptian sources, Winckelmann found Egyptian art static and obsessed with death, compared to the life-affirming art of classical Greece.¹⁴ Had he wished to state his position vis-à-vis radical comparative mythologists, Winckelmann might have insisted that the vitality of Hellenistic art proved that, whatever the sources of their mythology, the Greeks had transcended them to create a free kind of beauty that humanizes the crude origins of their mythical world. The gods became beautiful forms rather than allegorical representations.

Johann Heinrich Meyer and Goethe sealed this 'formalization' of the gods in a text whose authorship is only slightly less ambiguous than that of the *Systemprogramm*: 'Über die Gegenstände der bildenden Kunst', published anonymously in the *Propyläen* in 1798. Though written by Meyer, this essay came out of discussions with Goethe and a short text written by the latter in the previous year. When it appeared, it was widely

¹⁴ Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums* (1764), Wien 1934, pp. 44–8. See also Winckelmann, 'Erläuterung der Gedanken von der Nachahmung der griechischen Werke in der Malerei und Bildhauerkunst' (1756), in *Gedanken über die Nachahmung der griechischen Werke in der Malerei und Bildhauerkunst*, Stuttgart 1969, pp. 101–3. Winckelmann tries to distinguish between 'good' and 'bad' allegory in visual art; several decades later, the dichotomy between symbol and allegory was adopted by Goethe and Schelling for this purpose.

understood to represent the views of the journal's publisher, Goethe.¹⁵ Meyer and Goethe distinguished allegory—which had to be handled with extreme care, and preferably not at all—from the symbol. The latter worked through the senses, through aesthetic contemplation, whereas allegory was a matter of understanding, a cerebral affair. The text also insists on the pre-eminent status of deities in art:

In the symbolic figures of the gods or their characteristics visual art finds its highest subjects, even commanding ideas and concepts to appear in sensuous forms, forcing them to step into space, take on form and become visible to the eye. We would scarcely believe such miracles to be possible, if the ancients had not actually achieved them in their works. The great cycle of the twelve major gods, and the smaller ones of the Muses, the Graces, Horae, Parcae and others all interconnect, like the gears of a clockwork, to form a complete whole.¹⁶

This is as it were a Neoplatonic version of Winckelmann's neoclassicism: the beautiful forms of the gods incarnate ideas and concepts, rather than attempting to illustrate them in allegorical fashion. Symbols are not necessarily mythological subjects, of course, and many mythological subjects are arcane and allegorical rather than symbolic; but when Goethe began his series of contests for German artists he almost always turned to Homeric subjects, in 1799 praising Winckelmann for having led Greek works of art back to their *mythologischen Grund* by pointing out the centrality of Homer.¹⁷

Ancient art was considered to be vastly superior to modern art mainly because the Greek mythology on which it was based had provided a fixed set of beautiful symbolic forms:

although style changed, forms remained always the same; there were better and poorer images, but they were all made according to the same rule. By contrast, the moderns appear to be so much in love with the new that this prevents them from reproducing already existing types and characters.

¹⁵ Ernst Osterkamp, 'Aus dem Gesichtspunkt reiner Menschlichkeit. Goethes Preisaufgaben für bildende Künstler 1799–1805', in Sabine Schulze, ed., *Goethe und die Kunst*, Stuttgart 1994, pp. 312–3.

¹⁶ Johann Heinrich Meyer and Johann Wolfgang Goethe, 'Über die Gegenstände der bildenden Kunst' (1798), in Meyer, *Kleine Schriften zur Kunst*, Heilbronn 1886, p. 20.

¹⁷ Osterkamp, 'Gesichtspunkt', pp. 314–5.

'Modern' artists, that is, artists after antiquity, destroyed the persistence of forms because they did not want to be accused of imitating others; 'Therefore we recognize Saint Peter not because of his form [*Gestalt*], but because of the keys, just as we recognize Paul by his sword.' In other words: whereas Apollo was a transparent symbolic form, any old bearded fellow could be Saint Peter, identifiable only by his conventional allegorical attributes. After this it comes as no surprise that Meyer and Goethe paint a rather dismal picture of 'modern' Christian art:

One often hears complaints that our myths do not provide artists with the advantages the ancients could draw from theirs. On the whole, this is undoubtedly true, but we did not even use what *was* offered by our myths. The apostles would have made for a beautiful cycle, as would the evangelists, prophets and sibyls. Now there is no time left to make up for what we neglected to do, and we must be content to realize the damage that was done.¹⁸

The symbol theory shares with the Romantic and Idealist approaches of Schlegel and Schelling the tendency to naturalize by dint of organic metaphors: while the symbol embodies ideas in a 'transparent' way, the new mythology will reunite the various branches of culture and society and re-enchant the world into a place of wholeness and wonder. The modern notion of the symbol would soon be integrated into Romantic and Idealist conceptions of art and culture but at this point, the terms were being systematically opposed for the first time. In the years following the publication of Goethe and Meyer's essay, the Schlegels, Novalis and other early Romantics embraced allegory as a peculiarly modern and Christian device, pointing towards an unrepresentable absolute by means of imperfect signs. Schelling, whose classicist tendencies became more pronounced as the years progressed, shared Goethe's preference for the symbol and for Homeric myth. According to Schelling, in allegory the concrete merely *signifies* the absolute, whereas mythic symbols *embody* the absolute (although these myths can also be allegorized post facto); the concrete and the absolute are one.¹⁹

Schelling's theory of the gods as symbols challenges Goethe's in that it focuses not on the work of art as an end in itself—which it usually seemed to be with Goethe—but on the whole of society and culture. It is intended to be transformative, rather than to justify a specific art practice, using a new mythology to break out of art's autonomous zone. But

¹⁸ Meyer and Goethe, 'Gegenstände', pp. 22–4.

¹⁹ Schelling, *Philosophie der Kunst*, pp. 451–5.

the world itself would then be poeticized, aestheticized; it would become one great social-artistic symbol.

This is clearly not the intention of Goethe and Meyer, who seek to define limits rather than transcend them. Taking their cues from Lessing and Winckelmann, they developed what could be termed a Laocoonist mythology for visual art. In his *Laokoon oder über die Grenzen der Malerei und Poesie* (1766), Lessing had sought to demarcate what is proper to visual art and what to poetry, while Goethe was concerned that artists should choose subjects that did not depend on one's knowledge of literature; the viewer should be able to intuit a composition's meaning symbolically.²⁰ Of course, this brand of Laocoonism differs from later versions such as Greenberg's; unlike Goethe or Lessing, Greenberg did not tolerate myth or other 'literary' or 'narrative' forms in painting. Early Laocoonism wanted to ground painting 'more securely in its area of competence' just as Greenberg would later aim to do, but it did not aim to expunge *all* literary elements. Greek myth was deemed suitable for painting and sculpture because of its plastic qualities; its gods were turned into aesthetic symbols and the allegorical contraptions of the classical regime abandoned.

Whereas calls for using poetry to create a new mythology universalized one art—literature—and ascribed to it the potential to change the whole of culture, this alternative approach to myth was more interested in keeping the integrity of disciplines intact. Although the symbolic myth of Homer would ensure the coherence of culture and prevent its disintegration into autistic, 'pure' practices, Goethe and Meyer nonetheless envisaged an art of specialist domains ruled by medium-specific criteria—an art which Wagner, the great late-Romantic anti-Laocoonist, would call *künstliche Kunst*, artificial art, as opposed to the true, integrated creation of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*.²¹ It was to be an art administered by benevolent dictators, not one ruled by the amorphous collective that would be the basis of the new mythology.

²⁰ Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, 'Laokoon oder über die Grenzen der Malerei und Poesie', in Lessing, *Werke*, vol. 2, Leipzig 1956, pp. 138–254. Examples of militant twentieth-century Laocoonism are Clement Greenberg, 'Towards a Newer Laocoon', in *The Collected Essays and Criticism 1: Perceptions and Judgments, 1939–1944*, Chicago and London 1986, pp. 23–38; and Rudolf Arnheim, 'A New Laocoon: Artistic Composites and the Talking Film', in Arnheim, *Film as Art*, Berkeley 1957, pp. 199–230.

²¹ Richard Wagner, *Oper und Drama* [1851], Berlin n. d., pp. 101–2.

In the rather spectacularly unsuccessful *Weimarer Preisaufgaben*—artistic contests organized by Goethe around 1800—artists had to submit drawings illustrating a specified Homeric subject, such as Venus leading Helen to Paris. The stylistic preference was for line-drawings of the sober neoclassical variety, which had been pioneered by John Flaxman (about whose work Goethe was not too enthusiastic). Goethe hoped that in this way mythology could still fulfil the ‘binding’ function it had in Renaissance and Baroque art, with new rules—but rules nonetheless—and thus with experts and princes creating guidelines rather than abandoning culture to an uncertain future of mythmaking. He strove to develop an artistic mythology that could legitimately be part of visual art but would still maintain a link with literature through Homer. The symbolic, which is capable of bridging the gap between the visual and the written, can take on myth’s role in holding culture together—a role which is exacerbated when the symbol is integrated into the new mythology theories. Thus Laocoonist and *Gesamtkunstwerk* approaches to mythology in German Romanticism and Idealism share a common ground. Both try to impose some kind of unity on a culture that has broken with the post-Renaissance consensus, reshuffling the arts, redefining, limiting or expanding them in various and often contradictory ways.

Faust’s inventions

A third aesthetic approach to myth in the years around 1800, centred on the notion of original or individual mythology, offers the possibility of leaving this common ground. As we have seen, Schelling found such individual mythologies in the works of Dante, Shakespeare and Goethe. Since the modern, post-classical world is in constant motion and lacks a definitive mythology, authors must make do with whatever fragments their time offers them, and construct a personal system of myth which, through its internal coherence and sense of necessity, could have something of the power of a true, collective myth world. *Faust*, on which Goethe worked through most of his career, was for Schelling one of the supreme examples of such a personal, partial, historical mythology.²² Goethe was not always a neoclassical doctrinaire who wanted to force his aesthetic programme on artists. The concept and part of the execution of *Faust* Part One went back to Goethe’s proto-Romantic *Sturm und Drang* days, when he had not yet espoused classical virtue. Part Two was written when Goethe had become the *Klassiker* residing in Weimar, but long after the

²² Schelling, *Philosophie der Kunst*, p. 446.

failure of his militantly classicist programme for art and his battle with Romanticism, at a time when he was exploring the difference between the classical and the 'Romantic' modern world in a more reflexive manner.

With Meyer, Goethe lamented that each modern (that is, post-classical) painter had his own form for the Madonna. In *Faust*, Goethe was to give centre stage to a Christian mythological figure whose very essence is shape-shifting: Mephistopheles, emissary of Satan, who first approaches Faust in the form of a black poodle and repeatedly diverts his quest for knowledge and power with adventures entailing some form of disguise. *Faust 2* is an extravagant montage of allegorical tableaux, starting with Faust and Mephistopheles devising an elaborate supernatural masque at the palace of the German emperor. All kinds of fantastic and mythological characters appear, conjured up by Mephisto's magic, from Pluto to Pan. After the masque, the emperor wants to see Helen and Paris, the ideal man and woman of classical myth, in '*deutlichen Gestalten*'. Mephisto declares that he, as a modern northern devil, does not know how to summon them; Faust himself must descend to the realm of the Ancient Mothers—an invention of Goethe's, they are the rulers of a world of spirits, insubstantial images of the dead. They give Faust burning incense, and from the smoke he bodies forth the ideal, symbolic forms of the Greek heroes. When Faust, transfixed, tries to touch Helen while parading her and Paris before the emperor and his court, her ideal shape quickly grows hazy and an explosion ends the show. Later on, Faust manages to give Helen, with whom he has fallen in love, a slightly more substantial presence. Together they live in a secluded castle with their patently allegorical son, Euphorion, who meets with an Icarus-like fate, after which Helen disintegrates once more. These two appearances of the demigoddess from Homer's sensuous, visual myth take place in a dynamic and chaotic present long after the fall of Greek civilization; in the modern world, Helen is a misplaced figment.

In *Faust 2*, Goethe also shows a darker side of Greek myth not usually favoured by classicists: he creates a *klassische Walpurgisnacht*, a Greek equivalent of the annual gathering of German witches in *Faust 1*. Here we see centaurs, sphinxes and other less than Winckelmannian creatures. The action then moves to the sea, where water deities frolic, among them Proteus, who takes on a variety of shapes. Mephisto embodies the power of negation; his shape-shifting is diabolical. Proteus, by contrast, represents an early, oceanic phase of life's development, more replete with

evidence of nature's constant metamorphoses than later ages. As a naturalist, Goethe was a follower of Proteus, recognizing perpetual change in the life of plants, as, for instance, leaves become blossoms. He was opposed to the term *Gestalt* as being too static and final, preferring the more active *Bildung*, which is implicitly linked to the *Umbildung* (transformation) of what already exists (recall the young Schlegel's paean to the perpetual *Anbilden* and *Umbilden* in mythology). Opposing Linnaeus's classification of species as being too rigid and arbitrary, Goethe felt that a focus on nature's protean power of metamorphosis was essential, but also feared the extremes to which this might lead:

The idea of metamorphosis is a venerable, but also highly dangerous gift from above. It leads into formlessness, destroys knowledge, dissolves it. It is a kind of *vis centrifuga* and would lead into infinity, if it did not have a counterweight: I mean the drive towards specificity, the dogged endurance of what has become a reality, a *vis centripeta*.²³

In the art theory of around 1800, there is a perpetual tension between abandonment and resistance to centrifugal forces. Goethe's fear of the *vis centrifuga* in modern society and culture in many cases led him to worship the centripetal. More interestingly, in *Faust* he positioned himself in the midst of the centrifugal, form-destroying forces of modern history to assemble his own mythology from whatever he could use: elements of Christian as well as classical culture, with some added scientific speculation dressed in mythological garb. Taken together, Goethe's practice and Schlegel–Schellingian theory define a 'modern mythology' that can only exist in plural and in momentary syntheses which have to be wrested from the destructive storm of history. But it is still conceived in terms of *lack*, developed because the perfection of Greek art was no longer attainable, or because the coming mythology was still far away.

However, there were authors who picked up on the potential of an individual mythology without the hesitancy still evident (for different reasons) in Goethe and Schelling, or even Schlegel. For Herman Melville the individual project of an *original mythology* was no longer a poor substitute for a lost golden age or the announcement of a coming collective mythology, but a weapon against the use of myth both in symbolic terms and as poetic *Gesamtkunstwerk*. In Melville's sceptical and ironic variant, myth as art's heteronomous and non-identical side (always more or less

²³ Goethe, 'Problem und Erwiderung', in Rudolf Steiner, ed., *Goethes Naturwissenschaftliche Schriften*, vol. 1, Dornach 1975, p. 121.

tamed) undergoes a critical turn. To effect this turn, Melville depended on the radical comparative mythology of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, rather than on modern aesthetic myth—of either the proto-formalist or totalizing variety.

Indecipherable whale-god

Towards the end of Melville's *The Confidence-Man. His Masquerade* (1857)—set on a steamboat on the Mississippi—the character known as the Cosmopolitan, after much talk, leaves the boat's barber without paying for his shave. The chapter closes by noting that 'in after days, telling the night's adventure to his friends, the worthy barber always spoke of his queer customer as the man-charmer—as certain East Indians are called snake-charmers—and all his friends united in thinking him QUITE AN ORIGINAL.' This is followed by one of the book's three chapters of what might be called literary theory, entitled *In which the last three words of the last chapter are made the text of discourse, which will be sure of receiving more or less attention from those readers who do not skip it*. Here Melville purports to show 'the impropriety of the phrase, *Quite an Original*, as applied by the barber's friends'.²⁴ Melville argues that in fiction there are few truly original characters—Hamlet, Don Quixote, Milton's Satan; the term is often used to describe characters that are merely odd. Schelling would have said that these 'true originals' are the centre of their respective mythic worlds; that their authors have succeeded in creating original mythologies. Melville was engaged in precisely such a process, but his myths were no longer substitutes for unattainable ideals; rather, they were aimed against those very ideals. Melville's Cosmopolitan may be original merely in an everyday sense, but the novel's real shape-shifting protagonist, the Confidence Man of whom the Cosmopolitan is an 'avatar', has a substantial claim to being a true original. Though the Cosmopolitan is the Confidence Man's most clearly individualized persona, and the one who is afforded the most space in the novel, it is the strange modern deity of which he is the last incarnation that dominates the book—a shape-shifting modern god who is not recognized as such.

In one of the numerous 'theoretical' asides in *Moby-Dick*—digressions which mock, parody and deconstruct various branches of learning—Ishmael looks at the whale's 'face' as a physiognomist would.

²⁴ Herman Melville, *The Confidence-Man. His Masquerade* (1857), Oxford and New York 1989, pp. 316, 319.

'Physiognomically regarded, the Sperm Whale is an anomalous creature. He has no proper nose.' Ishmael realizes that his enterprise seems 'almost as hopeful as for Lavater to have scrutinized the wrinkles on the rock of Gibraltar', but he perseveres. 'In profile, you plainly perceive that horizontal, semi-crescentic depression in the forehead's middle, which, in a man, is Lavater's mark of genius.' All this is of course parody. Ishmael's—and no doubt Melville's—conclusion is pessimistic:

Champollion deciphered the wrinkled granite hieroglyphics. But there is no Champollion to decipher the Egypt of every man's and every being's face. Physiognomy, like every other human science, is but a passing fable.²⁵

Lavater's physiognomy, which had attracted Goethe in his youth, claimed to lay bare people's character by studying their facial features, thus basically showing them to be transparent 'symbols'. Although Goethe's enthusiasm cooled off, it foreshadowed his later symbolic aesthetic.²⁶

In Melville's time, criticism of physiognomy was hardly a revolutionary act, as the practice had been mercilessly ridiculed for decades. But his lampoon also targets the transformation of the gods into aesthetic symbols. In the whale, the outside form does not even reflect his skeleton, let alone some more profound essence: 'In considering these ribs, I could not but be struck anew with the circumstance, so variously repeated in this book, that the skeleton of the whale is by no means the mould of his invested form.' This applies to all sperm whales, as do Ishmael's physiognomic musings, but in *Moby Dick*'s case it is especially relevant as the latter's god-like, mythical status is a recurring motif in the book. Superstitious whalers declared Moby Dick to be not only omnipresent, but immortal as well.²⁷ Even though this is presented by Ishmael as superstition, it creates an uncanny atmosphere in which the whale is somehow not quite of this world. Ahab's obsession, of course, greatly contributes to making the whale a mythical opponent, a Leviathan.

This 'godlike' whale is obviously rather different from the idealized symbols of Neoclassicism and from the poetic gods of the Romantic new mythology. After his physiognomic speculations Ishmael remarks that

²⁵ Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick or The Whale*, New York 1992, pp. 378–80.

²⁶ David Bindman, *Ape to Apollo, Aesthetics and the Idea of Race in the 18th Century*, London 2002, pp. 94–6; Ilsebill Barta Fliedl, 'Lavater, Goethe und der Versuch einer Physiognomik als Wissenschaft', in Schulze, ed., *Goethe und die Kunst*, pp. 193–203.

²⁷ Melville, *Moby-Dick*, pp. 494, 198.

the Ancient Egyptians with 'their child-magian thoughts' would no doubt have deified the sperm whale, as they did the Nile crocodile. Here Melville subscribes to the view that myth originated in a childlike 'primitive mind', prone to thinking in sensuous images rather than in terms of abstract causes. However, this state of mind, which was thought still to exist in tropical regions, might return one day even in 'civilized' countries:

If hereafter any highly cultured, poetical nation shall lure back to their birth-right, the merry May-day gods of old; and livingly enthrone them again in the now egotistical sky; in the now unhaunted hill; then be sure, exalted to Jove's high seat, the great Sperm Whale shall lord it.²⁸

Such a grotesque new mythology, a bizarre blend of the primitive and the 'highly cultured', could only have been concocted by an author who was passionately interested in questions of the 'primitive mind' and of comparative mythology. The influence of Pierre Bayle's subtle debunking of myth and religious dogma on Melville has been noted, but also that of comparative mythologists such as William Jones, who attempted to defend Christian tradition against claims that Biblical stories were just versions of myths current in several cultures.²⁹ While Melville did not subscribe to the apologists' attempts to separate Christianity as revealed truth from all other religions, they provided him with a wealth of information on the myths of the world, and with a subversive potential he put to good use.

In *Moby-Dick*, Melville ridicules many myths in a Bayle-like manner through his narrator Ishmael, but on the other hand the Osiris myth helps to structure the novel. The dismemberment of Osiris by Typhon is uncannily repeated in the story of the god-like monster and Ahab. Drawing both on Plutarch, who tried to divine the rationale behind myths that were already alien to him, and on Thomas Maurice's *Indian Antiquities*, Melville created a modern myth that is also various old myths.³⁰ Ahab not only sees Moby Dick as a malignant god; he, as the self-ordained opponent, also claims a divine role. Here and in *The Confidence-Man*, Melville uses comparative mythology—setting Christ next to Krishna and Osiris—to subvert the search for an essence of myth, for order in the confusion

²⁸ Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 380.

²⁹ H. Bruce Franklin, *The Wake of the Gods. Melville's Mythology*, Stanford 1963, pp. 8, 66–7, 169–75.

³⁰ Franklin, *Wake of the Gods*, pp. 71–83. Franklin's book, although sometimes overreaching in its interpretations, is still the most fundamental study of this aspect of Melville's work.

of the world's mythologies. If, according to comparative mythology, all myths are simply variations on a few basic patterns, why not create a new version? If Christ is merely Osiris in disguise, why not dress him in nineteenth-century garb? If it were really to be a *modern* myth, this would have to be radically individual, self-critical and demythologizing; and it would have to take into account the tension between a disenchanted world and mythic cravings. The field for this operation is a literary one; for Melville, not unlike Schelling, myths existed to become literature. However, his conception of literature was different from Schelling's: for Melville, it is a constant questioning, and if myths exist to become literature, it is because that is where they become self-critical.

Proteus on the Mississippi

As Robert Wallace has demonstrated, Melville took visual art and art criticism very seriously, especially Turner's 'powerful aesthetic of the indistinct'.³¹ The ironical description and interpretation of the Turneresque 'boggy, soggy' painting in the 'Spouter-Inn' chapter of *Moby-Dick* constitute a homage to, but also a radicalization of the visual ambiguities and marvellous atmospheric effects in Turner's works, so eloquently described by Ruskin. These paintings suggested a visual sphere that was non-symbolic, in which forms or the absence of forms can suggest ideas without embodying them in a transparent way. Melville took this aesthetic a stage further. The whale's exterior does not reflect its skeleton, and Moby Dick's divine status is a matter of literary suggestion; it could not convincingly be conveyed by a painter, since even the whiteness of the whale functions as an attribute of divinity only within Melville's narrative. There is a sense of *paragone* in Melville, as if he seeks to demonstrate that literature can pierce through appearances more thoroughly than painting. In *The Confidence-Man*, he developed a protagonist whose quasi-divine status is invisible to virtually all of the other characters (the mysterious boy in the last chapter being an exception). To really *see* the Confidence Man, one must *read* Melville's narrative. The characters in the narrative cannot see him for what he is—although what he is exactly is hardly unambiguous even to readers.

The Confidence-Man apparently has several consecutive protagonists who, it is strongly hinted, are all the same person in disguise. His skill at disguising himself in extremely different ways in a short space of time (including

³¹ Robert Wallace, *Melville and Turner. Spheres of Love and Fright*, Athens, GA 1992.

a black cripple who mentions a series of people usually seen as alternative guises of the Confidence Man), combined with the fact that his schemes seem ridiculously elaborate and his profits small, makes him appear more than human. Like Moby Dick, the Confidence Man's ubiquity and elusiveness give him the characteristics of a mythical figure, of a god. The tone is set in the first sentence, when the 'mute' protagonist is compared to the mythical founder of the Inca empire, Manco Capac. As a (pseudo-) god, the Confidence Man is related to Proteus, and one of his avatars makes a sales pitch for a 'protean easy-chair' that perfectly adapts itself to any body. But many modern critics have preferred to identify him with that other shape-shifter, Satan. The work would then become an allegory with the devil as its protagonist, which would 'normalize' this outrageous book: 'given Satan's reputation as a shape-shifter and evildoer, the incongruous nature of the title character in his various disguises would merely be the result of a supernatural capacity for fraud and deception.'³²

The fact that Milton's Satan is one of Melville's examples of an original character strengthens this association, but in the end it cannot be entirely convincing. What matters is precisely that the Confidence Man is too shape-shifting for any single conventional identity, whether it be Proteus or Satan. Their formlessness was in a sense formalized by their mythological identities; here there is no identity, only a Rorschach blot. *The Confidence-Man* frustrates any hope for a new collective mythology as *Gesamtkunstwerk*; he is not even recognized as a divinity. He is the metamorphic principle driven to an extreme, Goethe's *Umbildung* out of control. The shape-shifting even goes so far that, as Bruce Franklin has noted, it has been suggested that the people who confront the Cosmopolitan, the main character in the second part of the book and an avatar of the Confidence Man, are in fact (also?) the Confidence Man himself.³³ The latter is various gods and no god in particular, thanks to the ammunition provided by comparative mythology.

Melville's pseudo-gods are constructed out of historical debris. As such, they are eminently modern divinities. According to Schelling, the Greek gods were natural deities (*Naturwesen*), and only became truly mythological in epic form, when they acted and created a history. Before, they were not true *Götter* but mere *Götzen* (idols). By contrast, the Christian world is a historical and spiritual one; whatever form of polytheism is possible here is only so in history. The modern world's deities are thus

³² Tom Quirk, *Melville's Confidence Man*, Columbia, MO 1982, pp. 58–9.

³³ Franklin, *The Wake of the Gods*, p. 164.

Geschichtsgötter.³⁴ Ancient artists created a mythology by endowing natural gods with a history, or histories; modern artists have to perform the opposite operation and 'plant the Idealist gods into nature' in order to give them some reality. Writers like Cervantes and Goethe succeeded in creating their own 'mythological circles' under these conditions. Schelling hoped for a future *Mythologie und Symbolik* based on science, in which the allegorical tendency of Christianity (from the real to the ideal, that is: real subjects pointing towards an unrepresentable ideal sphere) is reversed into symbolic wholeness (from the ideal to the real: the ideal is incarnated into real objects, thus creating symbols). Authors such as Dante, Cervantes and Goethe have as it were given us individual, 'original' intimations of such a new symbolic mythology. Have they not given the fleeting ideal deities of the modern world aesthetic substance, turning them into something more organic than allegories?

Part of Melville's greatness lies in the way in which he makes it virtually impossible to answer this question with regard to his 'original' mythologies. As a creator of 'poetic' new mythologies, Melville is closer to Schelling than to Goethe's attempt to create a canon of subjects for visual art on the basis of an existing literary mythology. But in the end Schelling, like Goethe, longed for a positive, symbolic presence of myth in art—and Melville's modern gods mock any such yearnings, whether in visual art or literature. Only too often have Romantic and post-Romantic writers and artists sought such presence and wholeness, thereby reducing to sameness, to a preformed cliché of the non-identical, the otherness they held up as a contrast to the disenchanted modern world. The early Friedrich Schlegel with his celebration of irony and allegory is perhaps closest to Melville among the early Romantics and Idealists, but with Schlegel, too, signs in the end only have value in so far as they point towards the absolute, even if they do not embody it in a symbolic form. Moreover, in the new mythology all signs eventually have to form an organism, the chaotic, *umbildende* allegories settling into a *Gestalt*, a symbol.

This goal is not on Melville's horizon. The presence of his fleeting modern deities is a negative one, a looming absence. The gods do not become 'plastic'; they refuse to take on a positive form. Neither is their elusiveness turned into a rhetorical manifestation of the sacred. They are not an allegorical arrow pointing towards the Idea or an announcement of a coming organic community. Moby Dick, whose exterior form does not

³⁴ Schelling, *Philosophie der Kunst*, p. 448.

reflect his skeleton, is a figment, a blank spot; the Confidence Man has no form of his own. If Laocoonist mythology uses symbols to keep the arts separate while preventing them from collapsing into complete isolation, and the *Gesamtkunstwerk* approach struggles with allegorical fragments while dreaming of a true collective mythology beyond modern atomization and specialization, Melville's 'gods' create confusion between the visual and the literary, undermining one with the other, offering no hope. These are the decoded, desymbolized gods of capitalist modernity.

One can argue that a 'new mythology' has effectively been realized in ways that exacerbate the dubious aspects of late eighteenth-century dreams regarding myth, their conservative and coercive sides. A rather divergent group of twentieth-century authors has suggested that what has taken root is not a new mythology created by artists but a remythologization courtesy of capitalism, spectacle or the mass media. McLuhan's work, for instance, drew attention to a 'mythical' media universe which seems to mock the dream of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* and the project of Laocoonist distinction alike. Adorno and Horkheimer analysed how, in advanced capitalism, instrumentalized reason reverts to myth; a different version of this dialectic of enlightenment was developed in the Situationist International by Debord and Raoul Vaneigem, who describe spectacle as 'fragmented and desacralized myth', and the 'pseudo-cyclic time' of spectacle as a perversion of modern historical time.³⁵ From such a perspective, artistic attempts to create a new mythology, which resurfaced in late surrealism, can only be seen as delusional. As the English Situationists put it in 1967, true modern art can only be 'an explosion at the centre of the mythic constellation', not an attempt to renew it.³⁶ More modern than much that came later, Melville's work is such an explosion. If Melville reassembles the exploded fragments, the result lays no claim to being a mythic totality; it creates what Barthes would have called a 'true mythology', one that steals myth and creates new montages of *mythos* and *logos*.

³⁵ Raoul Vaneigem, 'Banalités de base (11)', in *Internationale Situationniste* no. 8, January 1963, p. 37; Debord, *La Société du spectacle*, Paris 1992, pp. 125–60.

³⁶ Tim Clark, Christopher Gray, Charles Radcliffe, Donald Nicholson-Smith, *The Revolution of Modern Art and the Modern Art of Revolution* (1967), available at www.situationist.cjb.net